

SOME WOMEN'S NOVELS.

short of repastee, which is the settled daily speech (in novels) of intelligent people who belong to good society. We are bound to say that there is not much sin in the book, except hints. Nevertheless the flavor is high, and the incidents come quite near enough the dangerous line. Esther Craven, living in an obscure village in Wales, becomes engaged to Robert Brandon, a long, ungainly army captain, with a rather tiresome mother and two pious but maiden sisters. We cannot understand the engagement—for Esther does not return Robert's love—unless on the supposition that she said "yes" to ret rid of him—indeed being ready and the mutton growing cold. She goes away on a visit to an English country house, and there of course she falls in love with the son of the family, St. John Gerard. She becomes engaged to him too. She says nothing to Brandon, and when St. John questions her about that estimable warrior, she lies. St. John finds it out, and discards her in a scene of unparalleled brutality. His conduct such as the new school of women like? The girl grovels in the dust at his feet, begs to be "taken back," implores a word of forgiveness before they part forever; he answers with taunts, ravings, outbursts of half-smothered love, and finally with cold insult. She makes full confession to Brandon, who, nevertheless, treats her with heroic generosity, and at last goes away to die in the West Indies, while Esther, left destitute by the death of her brother, becomes a "companion" and reader in the family of an old English squire. Here she once more meets Gerard, now affianced to the niece of her employer. This is Constance Blessington, a cold beauty, who has been trying to catch St. John nearly all her life. Esther falls sick and is expected to die. When she believes her last hour to be near, she asks St. John to come and kiss her. After that she gets well and marries him. There is not a really estimable character in the book, except poor Brandon. Esther's one charm is her physical beauty; but that is quite enough to inspire the brute passion which in novels of this low class is dignified by the name of love. St. John Gerard has no redeeming qualities at all. He is dissipated, rude, cynical, unkind, incapable of a tender emotion or a generous sentiment. He does no good thing, he dreams of no useful work, he is simply a specimen of the utterly unprofitable fruit of an idle aristocracy. Constance Blessington has but two thoughts in the world, to be well dressed and to marry the heir of the Gerards. Considering the care and coolness with which for years she had planned this latter achievement, the alacrity with which in a moment of jealousy she discharges St. John is preposterous. Miss Blessington's principal business in the story is to surprise Gerard and Esther in scandalous situations. Once she catches them together in the library at two o'clock in the morning; again she finds them in the middle of the night (innocently, of course,) in Esther's bed-room. They are forever getting into queer positions and doing equivocal things, and after a while we learn to listen for the rustle of Miss Blessington's dress at the critical moment with as much confidence as we listen for thunder after a flash of lightning. There is perhaps not quite so much handling and kissing as in the work noticed above, but what there is is strong.

"Puck," the latest production of the salacious writer who is known by the pseudonym of "Ouida," is incomparably the worst of the three novels we have before us, and we shall waste but little time upon it. Puck is a dog who passes through the hands of many owners, principally women of bad character and fast men about town. In the company of this quadruped we are introduced to the green-room of a theater where flourishes the bare burlesque, to the suppers of courtesans, the chambers of gay bachelors, and the vulgar splendors of women like Cora Pearl. The whole story, except a few dull chapters, passes in an atmosphere reeking with the worst forms of corruption, and we can no more imagine a person of refinement reading such things with pleasure than taking pleasure in seeing and making part of them. How then shall we account for "Ouida's" popularity? Well, there are people who love to read of the sins they have yet a little too much conscience to commit; there are people who are moved by curiosity to look at a book which is understood to make free with well known characters in London, faintly disguising them with fictitious names; and there are people who relish daring language from a woman which they would not tolerate from a man, just because it is contrary to all our instincts of right that women should be familiar with those particular forms of impropriety. We suppose there are women who take a fierce pleasure in writing flavorous stories, just as there are actresses whose highest dramatic ambition is to wear trunk hose, or carry a cane and cigar. As a rule, the women who ape masculine vulgarity on the stage do it very ill, showing only a vulgarity of their own which is far more nauseous. As a rule we may also say that the women who attempt a similar indecency in books succeed no better. We can certainly say of "Ouida" that she has not represented the manners and habits of any class of men known to the world. We presume she has failed quite as signally with her women; but of the class of women with whom she has to do we confess that we are not qualified to speak.

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